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ABSTRACT

Professional ethics are designed to set minimum standards of practice and service for school psychologists. Ways in which professional ethics standards of school psychology can be used to build and strengthen work relationships with parents, legal guardians, and other family members are described here. Suggestions for how school psychologists can expand their roles with parents and families are highlighted. Some of the guidelines for school psychologists include: (1) view the entire family as your client; (2) expand your definitions of informed consent and confidentiality; (3) teach advocacy skills to parents, legal guardians, and to other family members; and (4) develop a tripartite teacher-family-psychologist consultation relationship. Some guidelines for parents are: (1) learn the importance of confidentiality and informed consent; (2) seek the support of other parents who utilize similar psychological services; (3) come prepared with a list of questions to ask school psychologists and other personnel; (4) ask for an advocate for yourself and for your children; (5) ask for a consultation with the school psychologist; and (6) understand the ethical practices of school psychologists. Parents should ask to see a copy of the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) "Principles of Professional Ethics" and should talk with the school psychologists about what constitutes good ethical conduct and professional practice. (MKA)

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Using professional ethics to strengthen family/school partnerships: Practical suggestions

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Using Professional Ethics to strengthen school family partnerships: Practical suggestions

Abstract

Professional ethics are designed to set minimum standards of practice and service for school psychologists. These ethical standards and practice guidelines become the basis for making sound professional judgements and taking responsible, competent action. This paper examines how the professional ethics standards of school psychology can be used to build and strengthen work relationships with parents, legal guardians and other family members. Suggestions for designing creative and effective parent interventions will be noted. Strategies for how school psychologists can expand their roles with parents and families are highlighted.

Using Professional Ethics to strengthen school family partnerships: Practical suggestions

Introduction

Professional ethics are designed to help school psychologists define the parameters of responsible, caring professional conduct. Corey, Corey & Callanan (1993) suggest that ethics represent moral principles adopted by an individual or group to provide rules for right conduct (p. 3). Herlihy & Corey (1996a) believe codes of ethics fulfill three primary objectives. First, they educate professionals about appropriate ethical practice and conduct. Second, they create a formal mechanism for professional accountability and monitoring of individuals. Lastly, ethical codes provide the basis upon which changes and improvements in the profession are formulated. In short, ethical codes are designed to safeguard the public and to guide professionals in their daily work so that they can provide optimum service to clients and consumers (Corey, Corey & Callanan, 1998, p. 8).

The ethical standards of the National Association of School psychologists are no exception. The NASP *Principles for Professional Ethics* states in its preface that [NASP] members "will be guided towards professional behavior, and a public confidence in the profession will be enhanced" (1997, p. 2). Codes are written also to protect members from potential abuse and as such, they provide a due process by which members and their actions are judged (NASP, 1997, p. 2). Thus, the NASP Code of Ethics is intended to guide and direct school psychologists concerning their conduct in all professional activities.

Using the NASP *Principles for Professional Ethics* as a base, this paper examines the ways that school psychologists can utilize their own professional ethical standards to strengthen

relationships with parents, legal guardians and families. The outcome of such a discussion should lead, inevitably, to new, creative and effective interventions that bring parent, legal guardians and family models together in collaboration for the mutual advantage of students and children.

School psychologists who use the 1997 edition of the *Principles for Professional Ethics* will discover that it contains two significant operating assumptions that relate to involvement with families, parents and legal guardians. Found within *Section 1 Introduction*, are two assumptions that underlie the development of the ethics code. The first assumption states that "school psychologists will act as advocates for their student/clients" (p. 2). The second assumption reinforces the principle of nonmaleficence by noting that "at the very least, school psychologists will do no harm"(p. 2). These two philosophical principles form the foundation for any discussion regarding family /school relationships. Without these principles, the work of a school psychologist lacks context and, as such, is without meaning.

Pragmatically speaking, the Code operates within another philosophical principle not explicitly stated, an assumption that is critical to the school psychologist's work with families. Embedded within the *Introduction* section is the premise that *the family is client, too*. Interventions that are targeted toward the student or client are services that impact the family, also. School psychologists who are successful if their work with children and families are those professionals who understand that all their professional activities involve around and are directed toward a family system and not singularly an individual child or student.

The notion that the family is a client takes, as its philosophical base, the tenets that undergird *virtue or relational ethics*. Virtue ethics are concerned with the character of the school psychologist and nonobligatory ideals to which they must aspire (Corey et al., 1998, p. 10). They

address the question, *Whom shall I be [as a school psychologist]*. In contrast, *principle ethics* are concerned with acts or behaviors and choices (Corey et al., 1998, p. 10). Principles ethics are viewed as a set of obligations and a method that focus on moral issues. The purpose of such ethical principles is to (a) solve a particular dilemma and (2) establish a framework for future thinking and problem solving (Corey et al., 1998, P. 10). They are used to answer the question, "*What shall I do*"?

While both types of ethics are useful for school psychologists, it is virtue ethics that emphasizes connection and context, an environment in which clients or client systems learn how to become involved or interact with other school personnel and school psychologists.

Embedded within virtue ethics is the notion of a relational connection existing between the school psychologist and the client or client system. The relational school psychologist is concerned not only about the context in which decisions are effected, but gives attention to the environmental, cultural, and familial context in which the child lives, resides and learns. Assuming a relational ethics approach might suggest that the school psychologistis concerned about the context in which their work involving the student or client occurs, for example. In addition, the school psychologist would be concerned about the impact of their actions upon the family system to which the student is connected. When defined as a relational ethics task, working as an advocate for students or clients means working with the families, too. The principle, *do no harm*, when applied within a relational context, could be reinterpreted as supporting the student/client and his/her family system now and into the future.

Issues in working with families

A myriad of professional issues and daily dilemmas face school psychologists when

consulting with or working directly with families. Questions arise including those reflected in the following examples. What are you going to do to my child? What does this report or clinical information mean? How do you really know that this test reflects my child's development? These issues are among the felt concerns that parents, legal guardians and family members ask school psychologists. While parents can [and do] raise a myriad of concerns, five key areas are chosen for discussion. These concerns are classified as follows: *informed consent, confidentiality, assessment and intervention, exploitation, competency and collaboration [with other professionals]*. Each professional issue will be described briefly. Relevant ethical standards from the 1997 NASP Code will be noted.

Informed consent

Informed consent is the hallmark of any ethical conduct. Informed consent involves the right of students and clients to be informed about the psychological intervention and to make autonomous choices pertaining to it (Corey et al, 1993 p. 86). The informed consent doctrine is becoming a standard part of most mental health ethical codes (Bednar, Bednar, Lambert, & Waite, cited in Corey, Corey & Callanan, 1993, p. 86). The NASP ethics code is no exception. *Standard II. A. 4*, for example, advises school psychologist to fully inform parents and students about all relevant aspects of services in advance of services delivery. *Standard III. C.1, C. 2* and *Standard III. A. 4* guides school psychologists to seek out and obtain parental support whenever seeing the student/client on an ongoing basis, with the exception of emergencies. These standards challenge school psychologists to secure continuous parental involvement (p. 6). *Standard III, A. 4* reminds the school psychologist to inform parents in ways which consider racial, cultural, and language differences; recognize differences in cognitive capabilities; developmental level, and age

so that explanations can be understood by parents, students, and /or guardians (p. 4). Further, it suggests that parents and students are to be fully informed about interventions in advance of any psychological intervention.

Confidentiality

Confidentiality is a fundamental ethics practice in most mental health ethics codes. It involves the ethical and legal obligation of [school psychologists] to safeguard clients from unauthorized disclosure of information in the therapeutic relationship (Corey et al, 1993, p 102).

Parents are entitled to know and understand this concept in a very practical way. *Standard III. A. 9, 10 and 11* discuss confidentiality and suggest how school psychologists should reveal clinical information. Further, these standards remind school psychologists of their obligation to inform parents and guardians about the limits of confidentiality, also.

Assessment and Intervention

Standard IV. B. Professional practices, assessment and intervention (p. 9) provides guidance to school psychologists regarding how best to interact with parents and legal guardians regarding psychological assessment and intervention. *Section C, Materials and technology*, offers specific instructions about the storage, retrieval and disposal of assessment material. Further, it offers suggestions for safeguarding computer and other electronically stored records. Parents and legal guardians must be fully informed about these practices and procedures early and those guidelines repeated as often as is needed.

Exploitation

These specific standards concerning exploitation reinforce the significance of the code's underlying principle to "do no harm" (p. 2). Within the ethical standards, there are several places

where references to "doing no harm" may be found. For example, *Standard III. 6, General Standards*, hints that school psychologists should not exploit their clients through their professional relationships nor should condone such actions. Furthermore, it recommends that school psychologists should not harass nor demean others based on personal characteristics (such as race or gender). Sexual intimacies with students, clients, trainees, or past or present clients are prohibited by this standard. If this standard were applied to include parents, families, or guardians, it could be argued that school psychologists should not exploit parents, legal guardians, or other family members, also. School psychologists are guided further to be cautious in *Standard E. 4 (Community)* when they are advised to avoid any action that could violate the civil rights of clients [and by inference, their parents, guardians, or other family members]. The NASP ethics code contains numerous cautions against exploitation that impact families and family systems.

Competency

Throughout the code, school psychologists are asked to show the highest standards of competent practice. *Section II Professional Competency* defines parameters for practice and articulates continuing education obligations. These parameters of practice are important to describe to parents, legal guardians, and to families clearly and concisely. Confusion and misunderstandings regarding professional duties and responsibilities arise when clients [families] are not informed fully about school psychologists' areas of training and competence. School psychologists are encouraged to seek ways to communicate clearly to parents, legal guardians and other family members about their training and scope of practice. School psychologists are reminded of their obligation to seek continuing education and to manage personal/professional conflicts. Furthermore, they are cautioned against remaining ignorant about their professional

standards and codes of practice.

All too often, parents and legal guardians express concerns about the ways that school psychologists share information about their children with other professionals. Parents worry that if a school psychologist shares information about their child with a teacher during a consultation meeting, that teacher might use the information later to show prejudice against their child. While school psychologists cannot control how a teacher uses such clinical information, they must concern themselves about their relationships with other professionals. School psychologists are reminded in *Standard IV, B. 4* to avoid releasing information to an untrained or unqualified professional under any circumstances. Still other standards guide school psychologists concerning their work with others. *Standard III, F. (Related professions)*, for example, describes their obligations when collaborating with other professionals and guides how school psychologists should consult with them. Contained within that same section, *Standard III, G.* discusses their work with other school psychologists, including those who employ, supervise or train other professionals.

In summary, the parental concerns that have been described here do not represent an exhaustive list of all possible issues and concerns that parents, legal guardians and other family members could bring to a school psychologist. However, they *do* represent the typical range of concerns that parents and others might ask school psychologists *daily*. Ethical school psychologists should initiate activities to respond to these concerns early and as frequently as is needed to support the welfare and best interests of students/children and their family systems. The obvious next questions for school to ponder are reflected in the following. *What interventions or activities can school psychologists do to strengthen their relationships with families? What are*

the first steps to take to strengthen family and school relationships? The recommendations that follow below are designed to provide creative ideas to to parents and school psychologists respectively about how best to strengthen parent/school relationships.

Steps to Strengthen family/ school relationships

School psychologists roles

Building upon the guidelines outlined within the NASP ethics code, school psychologists can take a number of proactive, preventative steps to support parents, legal guardians, and other family members. The following recommendations may help school psychologists strengthen their interactions with parents, legal guardians and other family members.

1. *View the entire family as your client.* Design interventions that directly impact the child or student client and advance the family's knowledge about psychological and developmental processes. Plan interventions that change the family's behavior with regard to the student. In some instances, family interventions are the treatment of choice to promote the best interest of the child.
2. *Expand your definitions of informed consent and confidentiality.* Be certain to make the explanation consistent with the family's cultural, racial and linguistic background. Explain these important practices in language consistent with the family's literacy and general levels of understanding. Whenever using written and oral instructions, be sure these directions are consistent with local and federal laws.
3. *Teach advocacy skills to parents, legal guardians and to other family members.* These family members represent the most essential ingredient to the success of therapeutic interventions for students/clients. Without their support, the formal interventions that a

school psychologist might utilize may lack context and meaning. Parents and legal guardians who are misinformed or do not understand the significance of an school intervention can contribute to its failure. Enlightened, educated parents, legal guardians, and family members create a total school/home supportive environment for children. Teaching advocacy skills to parents helps them to enjoin you to provide appropriate interventions while increasing the family's role in the child's school life.

4. *Develop a tripartite teacher-family-psychologist consultation relationship.* Rather than promoting a teacher-school psychology dyad, support the creation of tripartite relationships: teacher-school psychologist-parent. This collaboration promotes relational ethics in that it supports school psychologists' consideration of family context in the development of interventions. Organizationally and politically, this tripartite relationship bolsters the expansion of school psychologists' consultation and family intervention professional roles, duties that all-too-often are overlooked or devalued in light of overwhelming testing and assessment demands.

In closing, school psychologists are challenged to create new, innovative methods of working collaboratively with parents, legal guardians, and family members to develop viable, age appropriate interventions to benefit their children. In establishing these new relationships, school psychologists must learn to share the power to decide what is in the best interest of their students/ clients. Sharing this decision making power requires that professionals understand clearly the roles that each party has in the professional interaction and appreciates how each will benefit. As these new roles for school psychologists are developed, new roles for parents, legal guardians, and families will develop simultaneously.

Parent or guardian and family roles

The beauty of this new partnership between parents, guardians, and families lies in the articulation of new, expansive roles for all those who support students outside the classroom. New partnerships require that parents, guardians, and family members assume new roles in the daytime lives of their children and students. Several actions might be useful to parents, guardians and other family members. These suggestions symbolize the spirit of *Standard III. C. Parents, Legal Guardians and Appointed Surrogates (p. 6)*.

1. *Learn the importance of confidentiality and informed consent.* Parents should be able to define these school psychologist tasks and understand the implications of each responsibility for their children's school lives. School psychologists are challenged to develop practical ways to explain these legal and ethical concepts in plain, user friendly language for parents, guardians, and other family members (including other siblings) in language consistent with cultural, racial, and linguistic background that considers developmental level, cognitive capacities, and so forth.
2. *Seek the support of other parents who utilize similar psychological services.* School psychologists should make every effort to encourage parental dialogue. Where appropriate parental support groups may be formed or organized to help parents, guardians, and other family members best understand the delivery of psychological services. Parental support groups may be consistent with the code's standards regarding advocacy roles for school psychologists. Such support does not replace any existing professional obligations. Rather, this type of support is growth producing in that its impact rests in promoting client welfare and in supporting parental education.

3. *Come prepared with a list of questions to ask school psychologists and other personnel.*
Remember *there is no stupid or dumb question* when it comes to supporting a child's welfare and best interests. School psychologists should encourage questions about their work and service delivery. Furthermore, school psychologists should be sufficiently skilled to promote this education for parents, legal guardians, and other family members.
4. *Ask for an advocate for yourself and for your children.* Whenever possible or permissible by law or by local practice, encourage the use of an advocate. Within this context, the advocate might be a professional whose tasks is to support the family during meetings involving schools or school districts. Because procedures and policies governing the use of advocates in this manner may not be articulated, school psychologists should consult with one another and with parents about ways to create this support mechanism. Again, the purpose of this advocate role may vary and differs from other tasks that are prescribed or mandated advocacy roles, created intentionally to support children's or students' welfare. This advocacy role might help parents, legal guardians, and family members better communicate their family needs to the school. This practice is likely to be seen as consistent with *Standard III. 2 and 3* concerning the promotion of parental participation and recognizing the importance of parental support for children.
5. *Ask for a consultation with the school psychologist* about your son or daughter regularly and routinely. All too often parents are reluctant to ask for a meeting with the school psychologists because they feel intimidated by the sophisticated psychological information presented. While time consuming for the school psychologist, the long range advantages are obvious. School psychologists can develop or build a relationship with a parent where

previously no relationship existed. Parents, legal guardians and other family members can be made to feel valued as a result of a consultation. If a parents feel valued and appreciated, then their involvement now and later is likely to increase exponentially. Developing a parent as a viable and active treatment team member is a hopeful [and desirable] outcome. Moreover, promoting such an action is consistent with *Standard III, C. 3*.

6. *Understand the ethical practices of school psychologists. Ask to see a copy of the NASP Principles of Professional Ethics. Talk with your school psychologist about what is good ethical conduct and professional practice. Ask questions. As noted earlier, there is no dumb or stupid question when it concerns ethics. Parents should ask any and all questions they need to understand the school psychologist's roles and obligations. An informed parent or legal guardian gets involved in a child's school life eagerly.*

Conclusion

School psychologists partnerships with parents, legal guardians and other family members is an all important relationship that should be nurtured routinely. The basis for building this critical support connection lies within the NASP code of ethics and standards of conduct. School psychologists are challenged to (1) become familiar with the code's newest revisions; (2) use it as a guide for solving daily dilemmas and (3) utilize the code's wisdom to create energetic, timely, and appropriate professional interventions that support the student or client's best interest while promoting parental involvement and initiative. The final outcome is to create a bridge between parents and schools whereby children can learn, grow and develop maximally whether at home or at school.

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